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(2013)

Male and Female Sluts: Shifts and Stabilities in the Regulation of Sexual Relations Among Young Heterosexual Men.

*Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(75), pp. 95-107.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2012.758024>

**Article: Male and female sluts: Shifts and stabilities in the regulation of sexual relations among young heterosexual men**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary sexual relations are marked by a powerful double standard, in which women's but not men's sexual behaviour is policed and disciplined. There is some evidence, however, that constructions of sexual reputation are shifting. Qualitative research among young heterosexual men in Australia finds that some express concern about being perceived as a 'male slut' because of excessive or inappropriate sexual activity. This signals a slight weakening of the sexual double standard. At the same time, this and other negative constructions of male sexual reputation are policed only by women, and they sit alongside men's ongoing support for divisions of women into 'nice girls' and 'sluts'.

## **Male and female sluts: Shifts and stabilities in the regulation of sexual relations among young heterosexual men**

Sexual and gender relations are in a state of flux in Australia, with both growing gender equality and persistent inequalities, the pornographication of popular culture and increasing assertions of female sexual agency (Flood 2008). The sexual double standard—the differential judgement and treatment of women’s and men’s sexual behaviour—and the policing of female sexual reputation long have been features of the sexual landscape. There is, however, some evidence that these formations are shifting. While ‘slut’ and related terms remain powerful disciplinary mechanisms for regulating women’s sexual behaviour, particularly among young women, such terms also are being subverted and reclaimed. This paper reports on the emergence of a new term in heterosexual sexual relations, the ‘male slut’. In qualitative interviews in Australia, some young men express a desire to avoid this version of male sexual reputation, one earned through excessive or inappropriate sexual activity. The term ‘male slut’ signals a slight weakening of the sexual double standard and an increased policing of male sexual behaviour.

### **‘Sluts’ and sexual reputation**

The sexual double standard and the policing of female sexual reputation are interrelated aspects of dominant constructions of sexuality and gender. The sexual double standard refers to two standards of sexual behaviour, one for men and another for women, in which men’s sexual behaviour is relatively free of social constraint while women’s sexual activities are judged and punished more harshly. The sexual double standard is clearest in the ways in which the same sexual attitudes, desires and behaviours by women and by men result in different sexual

reputations (Holland *et al.* 1996, 242). For example, women who have sex with a series of sexual partners or have sex early in their lives (or are perceived to have done so) earn negative sexual reputations as ‘sluts’, ‘whores’, or a host of other derogatory names, while men enacting the same sexual behaviours may earn positive sexual reputations as ‘studs’, ‘players’ and so on. More generally, ‘slut’ is used as a common term of abuse for women which may have nothing to do with their alleged sexual behaviour. While the sexual double standard has been documented among men and women throughout adulthood, this paper focuses on its workings among young people in particular.

Among young women, concerns about sexual reputation are pervasive and persistent, as a multitude of research projects with young women in Australia, the UK and the USA over the past three decades has documented (Bartky 1988; Cowie and Lees 1981; Holland *et al.* 1996; Kitinger 1995; Lear 1995; Lees 1986, 1989, 1993, 1996; Stewart 1996; Stomblor 1994; Tanenbaum 1999). More generally, the sexual double standard is widespread and powerful among young people. While it is taken for granted by some, and resisted or ridiculed by others, young people generally accept that the double standard exists and has to be reckoned with (Holland *et al.* 1996, 242).

Some commentators have questioned the extent to which a strong sexual double standard persists in contemporary Western societies. Evidence for the sexual double standard is strongest in ethnographic and attitudinal studies, but has been more mixed in experimental vignette studies. While early experimental studies tended to find evidence of the sexual double standard, recent ones fail to do so (Kreager and Staff 2009, 143-146). This may reflect at least two factors. First, many studies rely on university samples, and gendered expectations for sexual conduct reach their peak during the teenage years and may decline significantly by university (Kreager

and Staff 2009, 157-158). Nevertheless, various recent university-based studies do find evidence of a persistent sexual double standard (Jonason and Marks 2009; Lai and Hynie 2011; Sahl and Keene 2010). Second, many studies examine perceptions related only to relatively common sexual behaviours (casual sex, premarital sex), while the double standard may be more marked in relation to other sexual behaviours (Jonason and Marks 2009).

Returning to the workings of sexual reputation, while awareness of the possibility of becoming a 'slut' is widespread among young women, actual definitions of 'slut' are nebulous (Stewart 1996, 129-130), such that getting a bad reputation 'could happen to any girl' (Kitzinger 1995, 190). Young women have been labelled as sluts because of kissing young men over a regular period, having casual sex, dressing in sexy ways, being different or an 'outsider', being disliked or envied by other girls, going through puberty and developing breasts earlier than other girls, being raped or fighting (Tanenbaum 1999, 11-27; Kreager and Staff 2009, 148).

Many young women comment that they face a dilemma when trying to attract men without 'going too far' (Kitzinger 1995, 190). There is a fine line between acceptable femininity (flirting, looking sexy, getting a man to notice you, playing along with sexual harassment) and unacceptable 'sluttiness' or 'tartiness'. It can be hard to 'get the balance right' or to 'draw the line' between being 'sexy' and being a 'slut'. Finding this balance, and exercising the self-monitoring necessary to get it right, are seen as routine parts of women's lives (Kitzinger 1995, 190). More recent research suggests that young women embrace ambiguous forms of identity and deportment to be 'sexual but not too sexual' (Attwood 2007, 242).

Among young women, receiving a negative sexual reputation can have a heavy price. Young women seen as 'sluts' face verbal harassment, the loss of friendships and associations

with other women, poor treatment by boys (e.g. boasting and joking about sex with her, and greater vulnerability to sexual harassment by boys who think that they can 'try anything with her because you are going to get it'), feelings of dirtiness and general alienation (Hillier *et al.* 1998, 26; Kitzinger 1996, 191).

The workings of sexual reputation and the sexual double standard sustain gendered inequalities among women and men. Sexual reputations regulate women's (and men's) behaviour, knowledge and expectations (Holland *et al.* 1996, 239). The threat of a negative reputation structures and controls young women's social and sexual relations and practices, steering them into acceptable forms of behaviour and maintaining subordination to their male peers (Stewart 1996, 38). Female reputations are constructed through powerful and normative conceptions of femininity, and it is very difficult to maintain the former while violating the latter (e.g. by being powerful, assertive or independent) (Stewart 1996, 39-40). As well as being literally under the gaze or surveillance of men and other women, women internalise the 'male in the head', 'the surveillance power of male-dominated heterosexuality', working to produce feminine sexual identities and disciplined bodies (Holland *et al.* 1996, 240-244).

Young men are much freer than young women of policing and regulation with regard to their heterosexual sexual relations. Young men and young women are not in parallel or complementary situations here, there is no 'female in the head' shaping and informing young men's sexual expectations and experiences (Holland *et al.* 1996, 240). At the same time, young men are under pressure to produce themselves in relation to dominant conceptions of acceptable masculinity and heterosexuality (Holland *et al.* 1996, 244). While there is no directly equivalent term to 'slut' with which men's actual or perceived heterosexual sexual relations are punished,

there are some parallels between the deployments of the term ‘slut’ among young women and the term ‘gay’ and its synonyms among young men.

Boys’ and young men’s school and peer cultures are marked by an intense gendered and sexual policing and saturated with homophobic references and accusations (Plummer 1999). ‘Gay’, ‘faggot’, ‘poofter’ and other terms referring to gay men (and lesbians) are used routinely by students to abuse other students or teachers, for humour, for disruption, and as part of performing gender or sexuality (Nayak and Kehily 1997). As Pascoe (2005) notes in research in US high schools, the spectre of the faggot is a key regulatory mechanism of gender for adolescent males. Like the object of the ‘slut’, the ‘fag’ represents an abject other, a ubiquitous term which is repeatedly invoked and repudiated in discursive struggle.

There are signs that the sexual double standard may be shifting. I move now to one of these, the emergent notion of the ‘male slut’, before discussing other signs of the reworking and reclaiming of ‘slut’ discourse.

### **Male sluts**

Negative terms associated with male sexual reputation, and terms in general, are far less common than terms for female sexual reputation. One early account identified 220 words for a sexually promiscuous female and only 20 for a sexually promiscuous male (Stanley 1973, cited in Spender 1980, 15). Some of the male terms were approving (*stallion*, *stud*), but all of the female terms (e.g. *slut*, *scrubber*, *tart*) were disapproving. There has been little research on constructions of sexual reputation among males. Nevertheless, at least from anecdotal sources, positive terms for male sexual reputation circulating in contemporary Australia include ‘stud’,

‘legend’, ‘player’ and ‘gigolo’. There also negative terms such as ‘gay’ etc. (already canvassed above), labels associated with lack of sexual experience such as ‘V’ for virgin, and negative terms especially used by women such as ‘sleaze’, ‘bastard’ and ‘rapist’.

Negative terms for males perceived as excessively promiscuous in their sexual relations with women are rare, with one US commentator stating that ‘there isn’t even a word—let alone a concept—to signify a male slut’ (Valenti 2008, 15). Terms such as ‘male slut’ and its equivalent are all but invisible in popular culture, at least from a casual Google search. A related term—‘manwhore’—has some slight presence, turning up in the Urban Dictionary and as the title of a website dedicated to ‘helping dudes be successful in getting laid as much as I do’ (<http://manwhore.org/newbie-guide.php>), and in various other places. ‘Slut’ on the other hand, applied overwhelmingly to women rather than men, has a pervasive presence, particularly in pornography but also in popular culture more widely.

There has been little sign that young men themselves use negative terms to police and punish the heterosexual sexual practices of their male peers, other than punishing their absence whether in terms of sexual inexperience or homosexuality. The use of the term ‘male slut’, however, among at least some young heterosexual men (as well as young women) may signal movement here. This usage was documented in qualitative research in Canberra and Melbourne in Australia.

For my PhD I conducted qualitative research into young heterosexual men’s sexual practices and the meanings and sociosexual relations through which these are organised, using in-depth interviews with 17 men aged between 18 and 26 (Flood 2000). The men were recruited in Canberra from ‘Stromlo Hall’, a residential hall on the Australian National University campus;



the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA, a military university); and a local Youth Centre. Then in postdoctoral research, I conducted further qualitative analysis of the sexual cultures of young heterosexual men, this time in Melbourne. Forty-nine men aged 18 to 24 took part in focus groups, individual interviews or both. In reporting on the data below, the names and other identifying details of the research informants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

The notion of the ‘male slut’ emerges in several of the interviews among the young men. The label is a derogatory term for men who engage in excessive or inappropriate sexual activity with women. Interviewees expressed a concern about gaining a ‘male slut’ reputation through sexual activity which is either excessive (too much ‘sleazing’ or ‘picking up’) or with the wrong women (those who are too young or who are ‘sluts’ themselves ). A concern to avoid the reputation ‘male slut’ is evident in the accounts of three of the men from Stromlo Hall—Adam, Scott and Jake—as well as Curtis from ADFA. Adam says that having a girlfriend is advantageous as one does not have to ‘go out and sleaze and try and pick up’. The problem with such behaviour is that, ‘*People* don’t like it. People perceive you as becoming the male slut and, you get a reputation and, it’s just nicer to have a girlfriend’. Scott is worried that by having sexual relations with first-year female students he may receive the ‘Fuck a Fresher’ award, one of the humorous sex-related awards given to individuals at Stromlo Hall and included in the Hall yearbook. Scott uses the term ‘slut’ for men in his conversations, and in fact comments that his friend Adam ‘is a bit of a slut, um, well from what he makes out anyway.’

Both Adam and Scott are comfortable ‘picking up’. They feel that doing so has costs, but these seem relatively minor, and do not resemble the powerful stigmatisation which can accompany the label ‘slut’ when applied to women. Jake, another university student from the residential hall, agrees, saying that he does not think the reputation ‘male slut’ is ‘anything *bad*

for them'. In fact, as Scott explains, getting a reputation as sexually active (through kissing several women in one night) can have a *positive* significance, in encouraging 'bad girls' to approach him and thus allowing him to pursue 'fast love'. This is an interesting example of an interaction between male and female sexual reputations. At Stromlo Hall and probably elsewhere, men also can acquire positive sexual reputations as a 'nice boy' or 'nice guy'. Scott earned this in his first year by not 'taking advantage of' a drunk woman, while it was also constituted by his appearance and studiousness.

In these accounts, the term 'slut' continues implicitly to refer only to women, while 'male slut' is a male version of the female original. This is apparent in the term '*male* slut' itself, something like the term '*lady* doctor', and for example in Jake's commentary where he defines 'slutty' as 'somebody who would go to Mooseheads [a local pub], um, throw themselves on guy after guy and then go home and sleep with whoever'.

Young heterosexual men's concerns about being branded 'male sluts' can shape their self-presentation with new partners, such as their sharing of sexual histories. Oliver from Stromlo Hall says that with new partners he downplays the number of women with whom he has had sex, and Tristan from the military university ADFA comments that one can be judged as 'loose' by the number of partners one has had. Downplaying one's sexual history may be relatively common: close to half of both men and women in an American study of 18–25 year-old college students said that they would understate their number of previous partners (Cochran and Mays 1990).

In Curtis's account the term 'slut' is applied to men in a slightly different way, in that it is constituted by the degree to which a man *talks about* his sexual activity. Curtis emphasises his

reputation among women as a good lover, but there is one kind of male reputation that he wishes to avoid, 'as being a complete and utter slut'. In 'picking up all the time', Curtis says that 'a lot of people branded me a bit of a slut but, they thought it was pretty cool, they didn't really mind.' Thus a 'male slut' reputation has some relation to Curtis's level of sexual activity; but in his account the reputation is organised less by this and more by the degree to which one 'kisses and tells'. He says that there are other similarly 'promiscuous' men who do have this negative reputation. Curtis says that his discretion is highly appreciated by the women concerned, and further enhances his positive reputation. In Curtis's account, men can be highly sexually active without being 'sluts' as long as they do not harm a woman's reputation. On the other hand, presumably women receive the term 'slut' on the basis of actual or imputed 'promiscuous' sexual activity alone.

The policing of the reputation 'male slut' appears to be primarily a female practice. Jake notes:

there's always going to be, the idea that if a girl sleeps around she's a slut and if a guy sleeps around he's a stud. [...] although, at Stromlo, as far as I can tell, the females tend to frown upon, the guys who sleep around, and the guys tend to frown upon the females who sleep around, whereas the guys will give you know the other guy a pat on the back you, good on you mate, whatever. [...] and the girls will definitely frown upon the other girls. So I think females, especially amongst my friends, frown upon guys or girls who sleep or get with a lot of people.

In other words, female sluts are policed by both men and women, while male sluts are policed only by women. This confirms other research finding that girls are significant arbiters of female

sexual conduct (Kreager and Staff 2009, 146-147). At least one other study finds evidence among young women of notions of 'male sluts' or similar. In in-depth interviews with British 16 to 25 year-olds, some young women said they will avoid 'male slags', while others were proud that they had tamed such men into faithfulness (Woodcock, Stenner and Ingham 1992, 244). There may be an informal economy among young women in particular contexts such as schools or peer groups regarding the sexual and intimate reputations of particular men. On the other hand, a recent study among adolescents finds that boys who are relatively sexually active gain peer status from *both* male and female peers and, in fact, more so from girls than boys (Kreager and Staff 2009, 156).

Most importantly, men who are sexually active still have available to them the positive label 'stud' while women do not, at least from my research. Usually men's use of the term 'slut' continues to refer only to women. The coding of 'male sluts' can be organised in turn by notions of female 'sluts' and by the 'two types of women' schema. Elliot, also from Stromlo Hall, expresses concern about the effect on his own reputation of having sex with the wrong women. Similarly, some young British women judge the safety of their male partners on the basis of the appearance or reputation of their previous female partners (Woodcock, Stenner and Ingham 1992, 244).

### **Clean and unclean women**

While a small number of men in this qualitative research express anxieties about being perceived as 'male sluts', an adherence to the longstanding notion of *female* sluts is more well developed and plays a more significant role in organising men's sexual relations. At the military

university, for example, Nigel names the sexual ‘double standard’ himself: if a woman is seen to have sexual relations with several men, ‘everyone thinks oh, you know *slut*, automatically’, whereas if he was to have sexual relations with several women, ‘I’d be considered a *legend*.’

A recent study confirms this association between male sexual activity and peer status. Conducted among US adolescents, and controlling for other factors which shape peer status, it found that increased numbers of sexual partnerships are negatively associated with girls’ peer acceptance but positively associated with boys’ peer acceptance. In other words, boys with many sexual partners are well-liked, while girls with many sexual partners have low status (Kreager and Staff 2009, 156).

In my PhD research, four of the interviewees used classifications of ‘two types’ of women, either to keep a sexual distance or to seek ‘promiscuous’ and stereotypically unattractive women as casual sexual partners. HIV/AIDS research has suggested that heterosexual men’s categorisation of women into two types, ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, is an important aspect of their strategies of risk management and prevention. Heterosexual men are said to distinguish between two types of women, ‘nice girls’ and ‘sluts’, and to take precautions only with the latter on the basis that ‘unclean’ women are sexually active and thus potentially infected (Venables and Tulloch 1993; Waldby, Kippax and Crawford 1993; Wight 1993). In my research, however, these schemas had little effect on whether or not the men practised safe sex with particular women.

Women were coded by the interviewees into safe and unsafe categories on the basis of assessments of their stereotypical attractiveness, ‘promiscuity’, ‘virtue’ ‘character’, demeanour and personal acquaintance, of which all were markers of the extent to which they were seen to

have had sex with other men. Codings were based also on women's apparent physical health, which is an aspect of the general practice of judging an individual's HIV- and STI-related risk by their appearance.

Women who are 'normal', 'healthy', 'cleancut', 'attractive' or 'beautiful' are judged by several of my interviewees to be free of HIV/AIDS (and other sexually transmitted infections or STIs). Curtis says of the woman with whom he began a long-term sexual relationship:

she doesn't *look* like the sort of girl who would have AIDS or, but I mean you can't really tell with just looks, but I mean as far as I was concerned I could, you know, she's not the sort of girl that'd have AIDS so, it didn't really fuss me too much that I was having sex with her without a condom.

The incoherence and weakness of this division is evident to Curtis and, despite his perception that such women will not 'have a problem', sometimes he will wear a condom 'as a safety thing'. In general:

whenever I have used a condom I've always thought well, do it for safety because you don't know where they've been, even though, I know you sort of look at 'em and all the girls I'm with I never say well shit they look like they could have a problem here. They always look like the girls who are clean-cut, the beautiful sort of girls no problems there, yet I was just doing it as a safety thing.

As well as using 'looks', some men make judgements of women's previous sexual histories on the basis of their demeanour or manner. Scott says of one partner that 'she seemed like such a sweet and innocent girl':

she was sort of 'the girl next door' sort of look. Sweet, and, charming [...] Just the looks, the attitude [...] she was sort of shy as well. She used to look sort of shy but, god she's not shy when she gets in bed but. [...] Plus I, I associate shy with good, and good with innocent [little laugh]. But, I was wrong.

Tim from ADFA mentions 'the lovely little timid girls that you meet occasionally that, you might be able to talk around into fucking you', with whom 'I wouldn't necessarily feel as though I need to wear a condom'. He says several times that 'you can just tell' which women are 'girls that get around'.

Classifications of 'two types of women' may also be organised by women's dress and other cultural and material markers of sexual activity. Tim judges a woman to be 'of completely questionable, virtue' or 'character' on the basis of what she is wearing (fishnet stockings, a revealing lacy top, stiletto shoes or sexy clothes) and whether her bedroom is 'equipped for sex' (as revealed by the presence of condoms, a vibrator, a four poster bed or a bigger doona).

Constructions of 'clean' and 'unclean' women are organised particularly by the conflation of stereotypical unattractiveness with promiscuity and disease. This relationship is repeated in young women's understandings of 'sluts' and 'slags', in which the terms can refer to unattractive or not-quite-attractive-enough women who display their bodies to public view (Kitzinger 1995, 189). Heterosexual men's notions of attractive-women-as-safe involve the contradiction that such women are more desirable to heterosexual men and may receive more sexual advances than unattractive women, have more sex with more men, and thus have a greater likelihood of picking up an STI, while women who are stereotypically unattractive 'wallflowers' have a lesser likelihood of doing so. Men in another study recognised the contradiction in

judging attractive women as 'clean' (Chapman and Hodgson 1988, 99-100), and the men in my PhD also showed some ambivalence about such codings (Flood 2000).

When heterosexual men construct promiscuous 'unclean' women in terms of their unattractiveness, in some cases they rely directly on the character of women's bodies themselves. Tim tells a detailed, well-rehearsed, and apparently humorous story of one particular sexual encounter from which he contracted genital warts and crabs. In what was a deeply troubling story to hear for this researcher, Tim describes the woman as a 'white whale, in a *red teddy* [...] a shaved ape', constructing humour in inviting the story's listener to appreciate the horror of this '*shocker* from hell'. He describes the woman's clitoral piercings, large body, tattoos and 'death makeup'. There are similarities between Tim's description and the criteria for 'unclean' and promiscuous women in the study by Waldby, Kippax and Crawford, in which the men mentioned 'diseased' genitals and tattoos (1993, 32), and both reflect longstanding linguistic connections between notions of sex, women, class, and pollution (Attwood 2007, 234). In this and other stories, Tim suggests women's promiscuity through the condition and size of their genitals, their body shape and their general unattractiveness. He says, 'She had a box [vagina] like a v-dub bonnet', 'she had more rolls than a bakery', and:

She was *fat* and *ugly*. Tch, God me. And she'd been through a lot of the boys. God she was filthy. [...] her vagina was like sandpaper [...] she had *rolls* of fat on her [...] her tits went down to her fuckin' belly button. She was, she had, acne problem. Oh, just to think about it makes me sick.

Given circulating accounts among men and women that 'so-and-so is a slut', men may simply rely on women's already established sexual reputations. Elliot and his friends perceive a number



of women at Stromlo Hall to be sexually 'easy', terming them the 'Stromlo bikes'. ('Bike' is a colloquial term for a woman with a reputation for promiscuity, in that 'everyone rides her'.) Having not had sex for a year, Elliot is increasingly interested in such women; but he says he is unlikely to pursue sexual relations with any of the 'Stromlo bikes' because of concern about his sexual reputation, his interest in a relationship, and a worry about AIDS. Elliot remarks that his friends would 'give him shit' for having sexual relations with women who are 'not even that good-looking' but simply 'easy'. Elliot wants a long-term and 'real' relationship, one where he respects the woman and more than sex is involved.

The discursive division between 'clean' and 'unclean' women intersects with social divisions of race and class and the representation of particular groups of women (Attwood 2007, 238-239; Pettman 1992). In explaining why many people have not changed their AIDS-related behaviour, Nigel cites four attitudes: that AIDS is a gay disease (a belief he personally rejects); that it will not happen to them; that people including himself do not think about it, and that people with AIDS will be obviously 'dirty'. His account of the last of these is a clear instance of a racialised and class-related construction of the 'unclean' and possibly infectious woman:

[People would] expect them to be, I guess some sort of dirty person [...] dress like [...] a homeless person or something and, you know a bit like a stray dog [...] I guess if you go to a nightclub and you see some really nice-looking girl wearing a great dress, you know nice hairstyle, white, you know, nice shoes, good dancer or whatever, you don't think, she could have AIDS. But on the other hand if you saw I guess maybe some... you know Aboriginal or, foreign person, dressed in a scrappy way, trying to, being sleazy with everyone you'd think, it *may* strike, not necessarily but it may strike in your head a connection.

Similar to the heterosexual men in other studies (Waldby, Kippax and Crawford 1993, 37; Venables and Tulloch 1993, 34), among those men in my research who include the notion of 'two types of women' in their risk management strategies, most have an equivocal relation to the division, express doubt about its accuracy and acknowledge its double standard. Scott says that 'it is really hard to generalise' and gives examples of both sexually experienced and inexperienced women who confound these stereotypes. He also describes the way in which men through their own sexual relations construct such reputations for women:

people look at her and assume she would have been a sleep-around sort of girl but, because they've made that assumption they've tried to sleep with her, and because they've got with her they've sort of added to it. And so they've built the character themselves.

Allegiance to a division between 'nice girls' and 'sluts' may be widespread among heterosexual men, but it will not necessarily be employed in men's strategies of risk management, as I note elsewhere (Flood 2000, 161). While four men in the PhD research deployed versions of the clean/unclean classification, in none of their cases did it organise their actual condom use.

### **The good, the bad, and the ugly**

Several aspects of heterosexual men's sexual culture influence the operation of the clean/unclean women division. First, the categorisations of female sexual reputation used by some heterosexual men appear to be more readily available in homosocial masculine environments. Of the social locations sampled for my PhD (2000), the Australian Defence Force Academy appears to involve a greater policing of feminine reputation than the other three

locations. A routine assessment of women's sexual reputations and a sexual double standard of female 'sluts' and male 'legends' is visible in the interviews with the four ADFA men. Perhaps this is because the military university is a historically patriarchal and homosocial institution which only recently has admitted women to its ranks, and their presence is contested and often resented. In such a context, the policing of women's behaviour is likely to be more powerful than in institutions where males and females have co-existed in equal numbers for long periods. ADFA has a well-documented local culture of sexism, with recent reviews attesting to widespread low-level sexual harassment and sexist gender norms (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011). ADFA exists within a broader military culture with similar emphases, and such a culture again is likely to involve men's policing of women.

Wight's research lends further support to the claim that allegiance to notions of 'two types' of women is associated with male homosociality and gender segregation, in his case by documenting a relationship between men's peer group relations and their maps of safety and infection. Among young Glaswegian men Wight found two sets of peer groups: one mixed sex, geographically dispersed and characterised by successful schooling and commitment to career; the other almost entirely male, parochial, and largely unemployed or unskilled. While the moral dichotomy of 'nice girls' and 'slags' or 'cows' was highly salient in the latter group, along with entrenched gender divisions and the norm of a predatory male sexuality, in the former it was largely absent and the men expressed ideals of companionate relationships (Wight 1995).

While the men in my study do espouse categorisations of women into 'nice girls' and 'sluts', they do not necessarily avoid sex with women they judge to be promiscuous. Elliot is the only one to mention keeping a sexual distance. Tim's and Curtis's accounts suggests a different sub-culture among his friends at ADFA, where casual sex with 'easy' women is legitimate and

even encouraged. In Tim and Curtis's circles at ADFA, one loses little or no status from having casual sex with promiscuous or stereotypically unattractive woman, and this practice is even codified in particular sayings such 'go ugly early' and 'fat chicks need lovin' too'. The practice of 'going ugly early' involves the attempt to initiate sexual relations with unattractive women in the belief that sex is more likely and one can go home earlier with such women. This choice is seen to circumvent the 'work' involved in wooing more stereotypically attractive women who are more difficult to persuade because of their stronger position in the sexual marketplace. Tim mentions that 'I prefer to find girls that are of ah, have loose general morals and are out to enjoy themselves heaps.' As he describes, 'you'd take your fair share of fat girls home and ugly girls home and, just fuck 'em.' Curtis says that men who do so will be teased, but they suffer no real loss of face; however, a man may suffer stigma if he continues to see an ugly woman. As Tim said to a mate, 'she looks like a fuckin' *bulldog*, get yourself a real woman will ya?'. Ronald comments that initially he did not want to be in a relationship with Eve because other cadets teasingly said that she was 'an atrocity [...] an untouchable female'. Hence, young heterosexual men may seek apparently 'promiscuous' women as casual sexual partners, while assuming that only 'nice girls' make eligible relationship partners.

### **A declining sexual double standard?**

Hegemonic constructions of sexual reputation are both persistent and contested among young people. In a British study, for example, one young woman rejected the positive image of male sexual reputation, stating that for her 'stud' equals 'prat', while some young men rejected dominant ideas of male heterosexual conquest (Holland *et al.* 1996, 245-250). In this mid-1990s

research, young men felt that the sexual double standard was changing and declining, emphasising that women now are more able to acquire sexual knowledge and to express sexual desire. I have written elsewhere of trends including a gender convergence in men's and women's sexual attitudes and practices, the increasing acceptance of norms of gender equality, and the growing assertion of female sexual desire and agency (Flood 2008).

One aspect of such trends is the contestation and reclaiming of the term 'slut' itself. Attempts to reclaim 'slut' are visible in the communities and literature associated with sex-positivity and polyamory, activism focused on the prevention of men's violence against women and a number of other domains. 'Slut' has been reclaimed for some as a 'sex-positive' reassertion of sexual promiscuity as legitimate and empowering (Attwood 2007, 235). For example, the authors of *The Ethical Slut* frame the slut as 'a person of any gender who has the courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that *sex is nice and pleasure is good for you*' (Easton and Liszt 1997, 4; **emphasis in original**).

In relation to men's violence against women, feminist activists and scholars have long been critical of the ways in which the sexual double standard and constructions of female sexual reputation inform the blame directed at women who are sexually assaulted. Slut-based victim blaming became the target of marches and rallies around the world in 2011 after a male police officer in Toronto told a group of law students at York University that the best way to avoid getting raped was to not dress like a slut (Friedman 2011). This political activism took place under the banner 'Slutwalk', and its language and the dress of its participants has been subject to considerable debate both within and outside feminist circles. As with women's and feminists' engagement with and attempted subversion of other dimensions of women's sexualisation, there are disputes over the progressive value of such strategies (Attwood 2007, 241-242).

The sexual double standard remains a persistent feature of contemporary heterosexual sexual and intimate relations. There is still relatively little space for the notion of a sexually desiring, active and empowered female sexuality, at least one which is not defined entirely by the narratives of mainstream pornography (Flood 2008, 232). Conceptions of desiring women still often represent women in terms which are negative (the slut), deviant and pathologised (the nymphomaniac) or subordinated (as objects for men's use) (Holland *et al.* 1996, 254).

Only a minor shift in the construction and regulation of male sexual reputation is signalled by the term 'male slut'. The label adds to the possibilities for male sexual reputation previously in circulation. It represents a slight weakening, at most, of the sexual double standard and the ethos of male sexual license, and perhaps an increased policing of male sexual behaviour, especially by women. Unequally gendered constructions of sexual reputation and unequal power relations, however, remain powerful influences on heterosexual sexual interactions. The reputation 'male slut' does not have the same moral and disciplinary weight of the term 'slut' when applied to women. While my qualitative research is perhaps the first to document young men's concerns regarding a 'male slut' reputation, it is unlikely that such concerns have dented significantly the ongoing sexual licence granted to men and the harsh policing to which women are subjected.

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